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An Attack on Commander Zero

The correspondents traveled all day—by bus, canoe and finally on foot to a muddy jungle camp on the Nicaraguan border. They gathered around a wooden table in a clapboard house to hear Edén Pastora, “Commander Zero,” give his version of the latest feud among the CIA-backed contras trying to seize power in Nicaragua. But he had barely opened his mouth when a blinding explosion blew the circle of journalists apart.

Pastora escaped with only “light wounds” from shrapnel. The correspondents were not so lucky. As Pastora fled by speedboat and helicopter, Linda Frazier of the Tico Times of San José was left to bleed to death, lying in the mud three hours before the guerrillas evacuated the wounded to Costa Rica. Frazier was the sixth American journalist to die covering Central American conflicts since 1979. NEWSWEEK’S Susan Morgan suffered burns, lacerated eyes and multiple fractures.

Spies: Most of the players in Nicaragua’s war, particularly the Sandinistas, had reasons to kill Pastora. He is a charismatic revolutionary hero, untainted by association with ex-dictator Anastasio Somoza. As such, he is the only guerrilla leader capable of rallying popular support against the Sandinistas, whom he repudiated in 1981. The Sandinistas also had the opportunity. Reagan administration sources noted that the CIA had

repeatedly warned Pastora that Sandinista spies had infiltrated his guerrillas. They also suggested that Basque terrorists allied with the Sandinistas and known to be in the region might have posed as reporters and planted the bomb.



Frazier: Left to die

The Sandinistas pointed their fingers in the opposite direction: at the “internal struggle within the counterrevolutionary groups” and at the CIA. Secretary of State George Shultz scoffed at allegations of CIA involvement as “absolute nonsense.” But the CIA was putting heavy pressure on Pastora’s Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) to merge with the larger Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN). Pastora stubbornly refused, insisting that the FDN first

purge itself of former Somoza henchmen. But ARDE’s governing assembly feared the loss of American aid unless the contra groups merged. Two days before the aborted press conference it voted to unite with the FDN despite Pastora’s opposition. Pastora apparently summoned reporters to disavow that decision, perhaps prompting someone on the contra side to do him in. Who really planted the bomb may never be known. In the murky world of Nicaragua’s secret war, the only certainty about the bombing was that there would never be a shortage of suspects.

ROBERT B. CULLEN with RON MOREAU
in San José and JOHN WALCOTT in Washington